

Report

3rd Gender Equality Review Conference Special focus event

Making the invisible visible: violence against women and girls in emergencies

Date: 27 October 2020

Time: 11:30 - 12:45

Online meeting with simultaneous interpretation EN/RU

- *How do measures and policies related to the global COVID-19 pandemic, conflict and natural disasters take into account the short and long-term impacts on VAW?*
- *How can the invisibility of VAW be addressed in policy and practice?*
- *How can short-term emergency measures address the long-term impact of crisis and conflict on VAW?*

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the OSCE Secretariat's Programme for Gender Issues organized a special focus event on the occasion of the Third OSCE Gender Equality Review Conference. The event shed light on the reasons why responses to emergency situations, including conflicts, need to factor in the issue of violence against women and girls as a crucial impediment to the realization of human rights and comprehensive security in the OSCE region. The event featured the contributions of four expert speakers from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kyrgyzstan, and the United Kingdom who framed the issues from complementary perspectives and provided recommendations, and was moderated by the Permanent Representative of Latvia to the International Organisations in Vienna.

Elisabeth Duban, independent gender expert, introduced the session as a keynote speaker and noted from the outset that while the reported increase in VAWG during the Covid-19 pandemic may be the result of an increased frequency in violence, it may also be attributed to greater visibility of the issue. The introduction of lockdowns and other pandemic-related restrictions increased the vulnerability of women experiencing violence since it served to isolate them from necessary support services. The adoption by States of a gender-blind approach when enacting emergency measures resulted in major protection gaps, such as a lack of services for victims and survivors. While many of these gaps are now being filled through clearer protocols and increased funding to domestic violence hotlines, they mostly did not form part of the initial emergency planning. Ms. Duban also shared links to relevant reports of

the [OSCE-led Survey](#) on Violence Against Women in Conflict Thematic Report and ODIHR's report on the impact of emergency measures on human rights and gender equality.

Ajna Jusić, Founder of Forgotten Children of War, Bosnia and Herzegovina, identified certain priority points for the recognition of gender dimensions during emergencies. A first step that is yet to be taken by some governments is the recognition of VAWG as a serious issue requiring an urgent response, and political support for the integration of a gender perspective. One way of achieving these aims could be to establish a working group that reviews domestic laws for their compatibility with international gender equality standards. All levels of government should promote a gender-sensitive approach and include women in decision-making roles.

Mukhae Abduraupova, Criminal Justice Lawyer and Director of NGO Positive Dialogue, Kyrgyzstan, highlighted some of the challenges faced by victims of domestic violence during the initial phases of the pandemic in Kyrgyzstan. For example, the prioritization of coronavirus patients in medical facilities resulted in concrete barriers for women victims of domestic violence to access treatment and also hampered lawyers' abilities to gather the medical evidence necessary for investigation and prosecution of cases. Women were also confronted with police stations' strained capacity, which affected confidential reporting of cases of violence. Despite the lifting of lockdown measures, women continue to face challenges in filing complaints against their abusers.

Bledar Zeneli, Counsellor at Counselling Line For Men and Boys (Linja Këshillimit për Burra dhe Djem), Albania, emphasized the role of men and boys in preventing domestic violence. In countries where men are traditional breadwinners, pandemics and their economic fallout create additional pressures. The outbreak of Covid-19 has therefore marked an increase in the number of self-referrals to the Counselling Line including from abroad. Without adequate counseling or support services, men often resort, or continue to resort, to violence. This year, rather than face-to-face contact, services have been delivered through video-conferencing or phone calls. Self-help materials for managing behaviour were distributed online. The inability to conduct face-to-face sessions created inevitable difficulties, as men and boys often do not have the privacy required to engage effectively in counseling and may stop attending the sessions. In prisons, phone calls are restricted and may only be paid for by prisoners themselves.

Comments from the audience noted the need for gender disaggregated data collection and follow-up of concrete strategies. The absence of funding for women's hostels, helplines and other support services was also highlighted.

In her closing comments, **Ambassador Katarina Kaktina**, Permanent Representative of Latvia to the International Organisations in Vienna, emphasized the need to make the invisible visible. Civil society needs support from all citizens, state institutions and international organizations. Now that the issue has come to the fore, we must do our utmost to tackle it from all angles. In doing so, we may rely on the in-depth knowledge of civil society of the practical issues, and should take heed of the resolutions they suggest to the problems that arise.

Key recommendations from the expert speakers and participants:

- Emergencies often lead to increased VAWG. International awareness of this issue was reflected in the UN Security Council's adoption of [Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and](#)

[Security](#) which provides a framework for a state's core obligations in this regard. These measures must be triggered at the outset of any emergency.

- States must adopt a gender-sensitive approach in the enactment of emergency measures. Gender experts should be involved from the outset in the development of emergency plans in order to provide an adequate response to a potential upsurge in VAWG. This includes guaranteed provision of women's shelters.
- Victims and survivors of gender-based violence must be informed clearly of how any emergency measures will apply to them; for instance, it must be made clear that they will not face any penalties for breaching lockdown measures in order to escape a dangerous situation at home or access support services.
- A targeted prevention strategy must be set up that identifies triggers for surges in VAWG and addresses them. Data gathering is key in this respect. This applies to regular settings as well as in emergencies, where the systems that are already in place become more fragile than ever.
- Even in emergencies, the proper and effective investigation of allegations of gender-based violence must take place and effective protection and support of victims/survivors should be prioritised .
- Emergency planning for health crises must ensure provision of medical help to victims of VAWG in instances where hospitals may be at full capacity.
- In post-conflict settings, women who faced sexual violence in war may be retraumatized during emergencies, and must therefore be offered adequate support.
- Men and boys must be included in the drive to reduce VAWG. Offenders who are serving sentences should be provided with adequate facilities for undertaking counseling sessions, for instance via video-conferencing.